

China Shows Greater Tolerance for Islam

China's treatment of its Muslims has clearly improved since the Cultural Revolution, when some clergymen were reportedly paraded through the streets. Islam, like Christianity and Buddhism, is protected in theory by a new state Constitution adopted last December. "People have the right to believe or not to believe in religion," said Bahar Rahim, an Uzbek official in Xinjiang.

But the watchdog Religious Affairs Bureau still monitors religious activities. Ismail Amat, the chairman of Xinjiang's regional government, said last year, "We must deal blows at all violations of law, crimes and counterrevolutionary sabotage carried out under the cloak of religion." He gave no examples. Muslim clergymen are expected to keep their followers in line. In early November 1981 riots broke out in Kashgar after a Chinese killed a Uighur in a dispute. Kassem Karaji, the Imam of Kashgar's Id Kah Mosque, visited several mosques to reduce the tension. "I told the worshippers that they must have confidence in the government and that these people would be dealt with by law and nobody should interfere," he recalled.

Since 1980, Peking has allowed scores of Muslims each year to make the Hajj to Makkah. The visas are arranged through Pakistan because China does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia. In return, the pilgrims help promote China's ties with Muslim countries. When Saleh Mullah, a Kashgar clergyman, made his Hajj in 1981, he and four other pilgrims stopped in Pakistan and Bangladesh on their way

home as guests of the local Muslims.

The authorities have printed 70,000 copies of the Qur'an in Arabic to replace those lost in the Cultural Revolution, though Amin conceded that "it is still not enough." There are plans to print another 30,000 copies in Uighur next year. About 120,000 copies of the Hadith, a collection of the Prophet's sayings, has been printed in Uighur, Amin said.

Islam is strongest in ethnic areas like southern Xinjiang and perhaps no more so than in China's westernmost city of Kashgar. As early as the 9th century, the faith followed the caravans along the old Silk Road to Kashgar, where it supplanted Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity, before eventually dominating the rest of Xinjiang in the 14th century. Because Islam took roots before the Chinese subdued the local tribes and asserted control over the frontier, the Communist regime views it as indigenous. By contrast, it treats Christianity as a religion imported by foreign missionaries.

Imam Karaji, sitting on a carpeted floor of his home, said, "We have no exact statistics" about practising Muslims in Kashgar. But he estimated that 4,000 to 5,000 worshippers attended daily prayers at his mosque, while 10,000 to 15,000 came for the Friday service. Muslims do not get Friday off, but the Imam said they took advantage of the long lunch

break. The Government forbids religious education for those under 18, but Muslim beliefs get passed on at home.

Imam Karaji agreed that "more and more young people are coming to the mosque." And in the square outside Kashgar's Id Kah Mosque, a young school teacher born after the Communists took power declared that "everyone believes in Islam here."

The Pahatekli Commune outside Kashgar has 2,320 Uighur families organised into 43 production teams. It also has 43 mosques. "Each team has its own mosque," the commune's party secretary, Abdullah Ahmed, proudly said. "It is 100 percent Muslim here." He also reported that his commune had 240 Communist Party members, who are supposed to be atheists.

The authorities have rationalised the appearance of party officials at religious functions by claiming that they are respecting ethnic tradition. "It is according to their custom and does not mean that they believe in religion," insisted Amin. Imam Karaji insisted that he did not expect a return to suppression of religion. "I am confident that under the Communist Party of China, Islam will continue to be practised," he said. But the coexistence of Islam and Marxism in Xinjiang glosses over their inherent contradictions, and the Imam implied that there was no room for spiritual compromise.

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet was asked, "Which is the best deed?" He said, "Belief in Allah and His Apostle." He was then asked "Which is the next (in goodness)?" He said, "Haji-Mabrur."

Muslims in China

A veteran leader of Muslims in Xinjiang province of China has said that he was satisfied with China's current policy on religion. Xilpuljang, the 62-year-old Imam of the Dayanghang Masjid in Urumqi capital city of Xinjiang, was quoted by Xinhua news agency as saying he hoped that this policy would continue.

The Imam said that interruption of religious life during 10 years of "cultural revolution" — 1966 to 1976 — made him feel that the "present normal religious life is all the more precious." Dayanghang Masjid, built more than a century ago, is one of 12 Masajid in Urumqi city.

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Christopher Wren

KASHGAR, China:

From a slender minaret of the Id Kah Mosque, a loudspeaker summoned the faithful to evening prayer. A street vendor removed his cloth shoes, knelt on a piece of cardboard under a poplar tree and pressed his forehead to the ground in the southwestward direction of Makkah. Inside the rambling mosque in this heavily Muslim city in western China, a row of other worshippers facing the whitewashed wall took up the affirmation of God's greatness — "Allah-o-Akbar!"

Daily prayer goes on today in the world's most populous atheistic country. After harsh but ultimately unsuccessful persecution by Maoist radicals, the authorities have allowed Islam to flourish and become China's most active religion. Statistics from last year's nationwide census indicated that China has about 13 million ethnic Muslims. Unofficial estimates put the number closer to 20 million.

Mehut Amin, an official of the Religious Affairs Bureau in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, estimated that there were seven million Muslim believers in the northwestern region alone. He said the Xinjiang also had 12,000 working mosques and 15,000 Muslim clergy and other functionaries. "Where there are Muslims, there are mosques," Amin said during an interview in Xin-

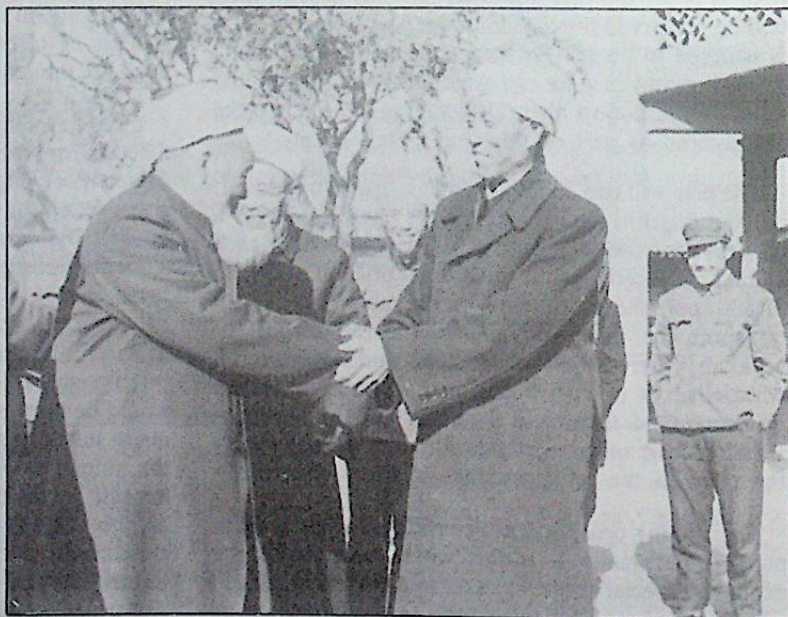
jiang's capital of Urumqi, "Where there are mosques, there are religious personnel."

Peking has allowed a qualified return to overall freedom of religion in the last few years. It seems most tolerant of Islam, for reasons that go beyond a desire to avoid provoking the kind of fanaticism that has wracked Iran.

The majority of China's mostly Sunni Muslims belong to ethnic minorities that inhabit the sensitive frontier regions. Xinjiang, which borders Mongolia, the Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, has six million Uighurs and one million Kazakhs, as well as lesser numbers of Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Tadjiks and 520,000 Huis or Chinese-speaking Muslims.

China's defence strategy hinges upon placating such minorities. A display of religious tolerance also enhances China's image among the nations of Asia, the Mid-east and Africa. China has diplomatic links with nearly two dozen Muslim countries.

Last month, Xi Zhongxun, a senior party official, urged Chinese Muslims to cultivate religious and cultural contacts with Muslims abroad. The ideological journal *Red Flag* explained last summer that such religious contacts would "play an important role in raising our country's political influence." Xi also warned that Chinese Muslims "would not allow any foreign religious organisations or persons to interfere" in their activities.



Sheikh Muhammad, the Imam of a Mosque in China (left) shakes hands with well-wishers.